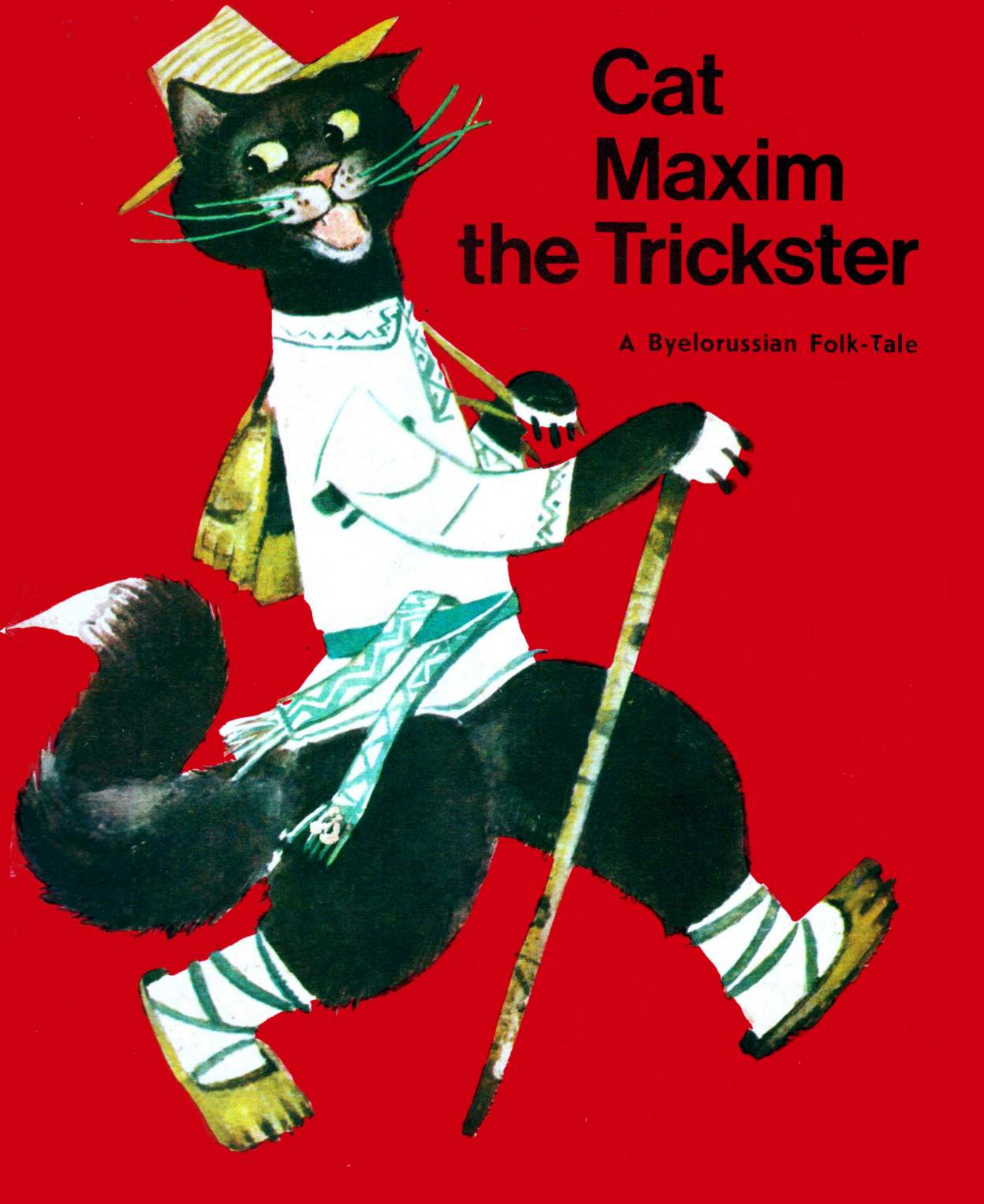

Cat Maxim the Trickster

A Byelorussian Folk-Tale

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Translated
from the Byelorussian
by M. Kazakova

Minsk 1982

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ONCE UPON A TIME THERE LIVED AN OLD MAN and an old woman and they had a son and a cat. The son's name was Martin and the cat's name was Maxim. After the old people died, Martin and his cat Maxim lived all alone.

Martin was a great loafer and idled away most of his time. Maxim would bring him something to eat, catching a bird or stealing a piece of pork or sausage from the neighbours.

And for some time they lived a carefree life, but one day Martin's hut caught fire and burned down. Only a stove remained standing in its place.

"What shall we do now?" asked the Cat of his master. "We'll have to build a new hut, won't we?"

"What do we need a hut for?" said the lazy Martin. "We can do well enough with the stove alone."

And they lived on the stove for a year and a day until it finally fell to pieces.

"What shall we do now?" again asked Maxim of his master.

"As for me," said Martin, "I'd rather marry a rich girl. She will build a hut for me."

"Who'll marry you, lazybones!" laughed Maxim. "You don't even look like a man, lying on the stove all day long."

"That's none of your worries! I think a princess will be just the wife for me. You'd better listen to me, Maxim. Go to the Tsar and tell him that Mr. ... let's say, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes wants to marry his daughter. Tell him he'll find no richer man in this country. Tell him anything you like but make sure it sounds like the truth."

"That won't be so easy, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes," Maxim said.

"Just go and do as I tell you to, or else you'll get a good whipping."

"Well," said Cat Maxim, "I can try my luck."

Fearing Martin might starve without him, Maxim brought the lazy good-for-nothing some food and went away.

After some hours of walking Maxim came up to the forest. Suddenly he saw a Hare running up to him.

"Hallo, Cat!" said the Hare. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the Tsar," answered Maxim.

"What are you going to the Tsar for?"

Cat Maxim thought a while and answered:

"I want to get justice."

"Justice? What justice are you looking for?" asked the Hare.

"You see, whenever Mistress Puss steals something or breaks something, Master Puss is to blame for it. People say, it's Master Puss that ate the sour-cream, Master Puss that stole the pork... whereas Master Puss had nothing

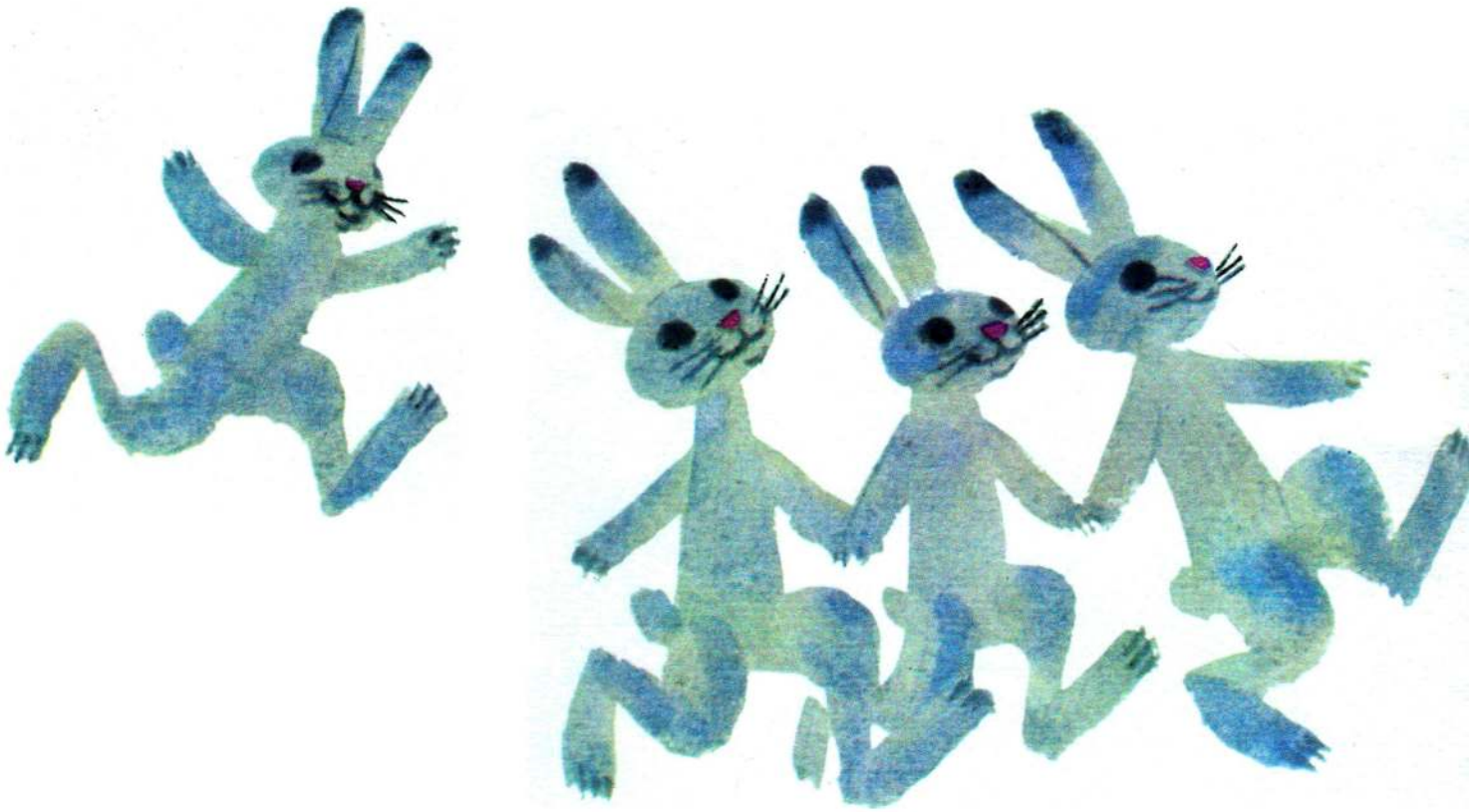
to do with it at all. That's unfair, I cannot bare this injustice any longer."

"May I go with you?" asked the Hare.

"What for?"

"You see, I'm seeking justice, too. Whenever a Hare does something wrong, people say, it's Father Hare that is to blame, Father Hare, the Mischief Maker, must have been here. Who broke the stocks in the garden? Whom are the dogs after? It's all Father Hare's fault! But indeed he knows nothing about it, hasn't even been there. It's Mother Hare, the Busybody, who is to blame. It's unfair, I cannot bare this injustice any longer. I'll go to the Tsar and get justice."

"Don't go there alone," Maxim said. "The court won't believe you unless you have witnesses with you."



"But aren't you going there alone?" the Hare asked.

"Well, you see, I've got a lot of relatives in town. My father and grandfathers, my uncles and brothers all live there. When each one of them says a word in my favour, the court will believe me. If you can find some three hundred witnesses, then you can go to town to seek justice."

The Hare looked around and began to shout:

"Hey, father and grandfathers, brothers and uncles, come to me!"

In a moment a lot of hares gathered around him. And Maxim led the whole flock of hares to the Tsar's palace.

Not far from the Tsar's palace the tricky Cat saw a large barn.

"Wait for me in the barn," he said to the hares. "When the trial is over I shall tell the Tsar about you."

All the hares went into the barn. No sooner was the last hare in than Maxim banged the door shut, bolted it quickly and went off to the Tsar alone, clapping his hands in glee.

As Maxim came up to the palace, he saw a guard at the door.

"Open the door!" the Cat shouted.

"What do you want here?" asked the guard.

"Show me the way to the Tsar!"

And the soldier showed Cat Maxim the way to the Tsar, who was sitting in a large hall.

"Your Mighty Majesty, good afternoon!" Maxim bowed low in reverence.

"Good afternoon, Cat!" said the Tsar. "What do you want?"

"My master, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes, has sent you a present."

"But where is the present?" asked the Tsar.

"It is in the barn, let me show it to you," Maxim the Trickster answered.

The Tsar went out to the barn and saw that it was full of hares.

"Your master must be a very rich man to make me such a present," the Tsar said greatly impressed. "He must have lots more, I suppose."

"Oh! He's the richest man in the country. He's got everything in the world but a mistress in his house. So he has sent me to tell you he would like to marry your daughter."

Saying nothing about marriage the Tsar invited Maxim to the palace and gave him plenty to eat and to drink. When the time came for the Cat to leave, a basket full of delicious things was given to him to eat on his way home.

On returning home Maxim the Trickster found his master dying of hunger. He had long ago eaten up whatever food there had been left in the house.

Maxim uncovered the basket and began feeding his master. Soon Mr. Clay-and-Ashes felt well enough to ask for the Tsar's answer.

"Oh, nothing of any interest," the Cat replied.

"Then you must go to him again, but first leave me some food."

Cat Maxim left his master the basket of food and set off again to the Tsar's palace.

As the tricky Cat came to the forest, he saw a Wolf running towards him.

"Where are you going, Cat?" asked the Wolf.

"To the Tsar."

"What are you going to him for?"

"I want to find justice," answered the Cat and told the Wolf what justice he was seeking.

"May I go with you? I am always blamed for things I am not at all guilty of."

"The court won't believe you if you come alone," Maxim said to the Wolf.

"But are you going there alone?" asked the Wolf.

"You can't compare yourself to me," said Maxim. "I am well known in the Tsar's family. I have a father and grandfathers, brothers and uncles in town. And who are you? Even the dogs run away when they see you."

"Then tell me what to do," said the Wolf.

"If you find three hundred witnesses to appear for you in court, the Judge will believe you," the tricky Cat answered.

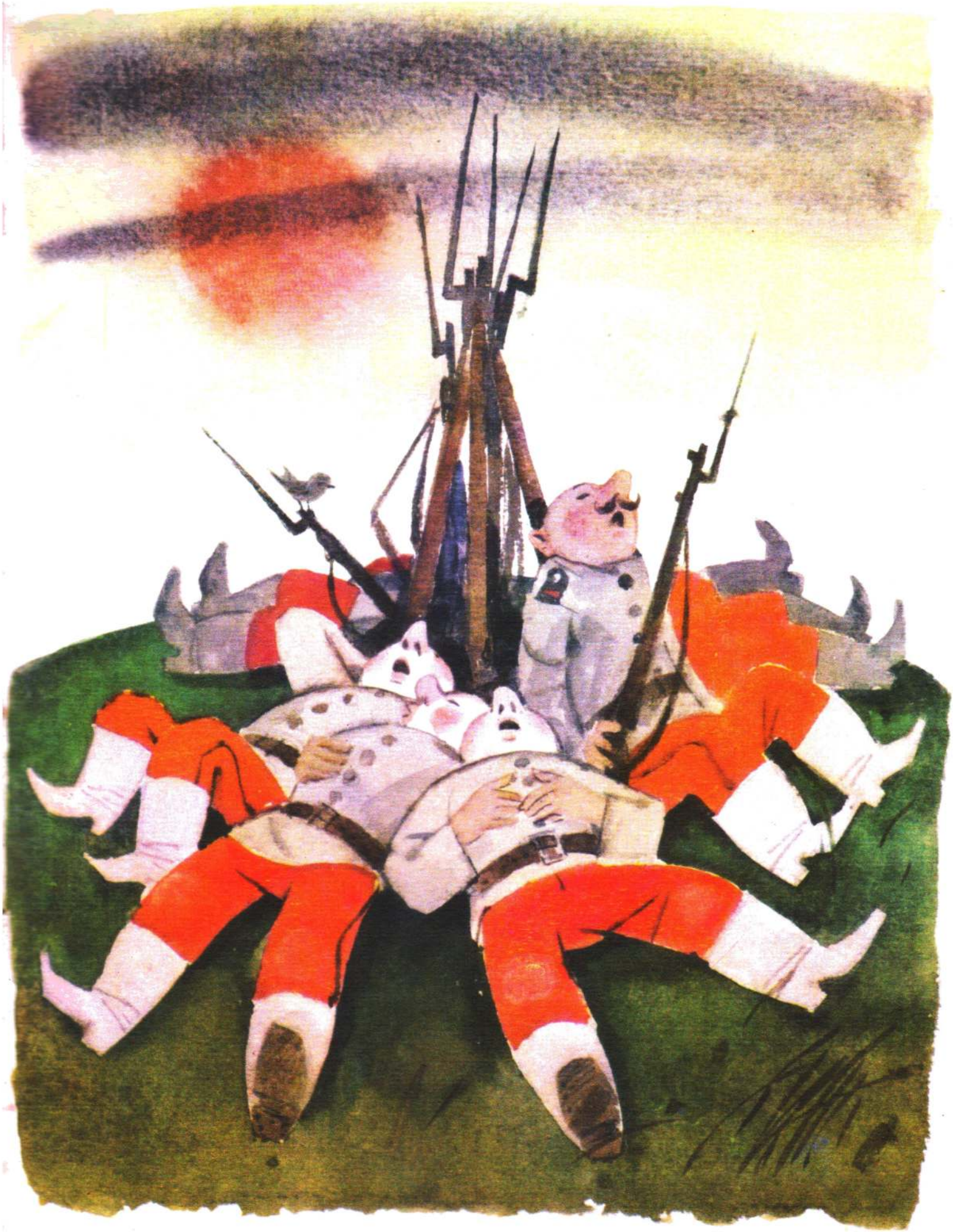
The Wolf jumped up, fell down and bumped his head against the ground. Then he began to howl:

"Hey, father and grandfathers, brothers and uncles, come to me!"

Soon from the whole forest there came wolves running towards him.

Cat Maxim led the wolves to the Tsar. As they reached the palace, the wolves could hardly wait to get in.

"We'll go first!" they said.



"No, you won't," said the Cat. "My complaint was handed in long time ago. When the hearing of my case is over, I shall tell the Judge about your complaint. Then you'll be asked to come in. And now go and wait for me over there in the barn."

Their tails hanging, the wolves went slowly into the barn. When the last wolf was in, Maxim banged the door shut and bolted it quickly.

Clapping his hands in glee, the Cat hurried to the palace. As he knocked, a familiar soldier opened the door and let him in. The Cat went straight to the Tsar's chamber.

"Well, what's the news?" the Tsar asked.

"My master, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes, has sent you a present," Cat Maxim the Trickster answered.

"Well," said the Tsar, "show it to me."

And they went together to the barn, where the Tsar saw so many wolves he could not count them. They were everywhere: standing or lying one on top of the other, they filled up all the empty spaces behind the stalls and up to the very roof.

The Tsar ordered the wolves to be killed and coats to be made of their skins for all his servants.

"Tell your master, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes, to come and be my guest," the Tsar said to the Cat.

Maxim ran home. Breathless and tired he returned late in the night. For a long time the Cat could not wake his master. When at last Martin opened his eyes, Cat Maxim cried:

"Get up! I'm back from the Tsar."

"So what did the Tsar say?" Mr. Clay-and-Ashes asked, stretching himself and yawning.

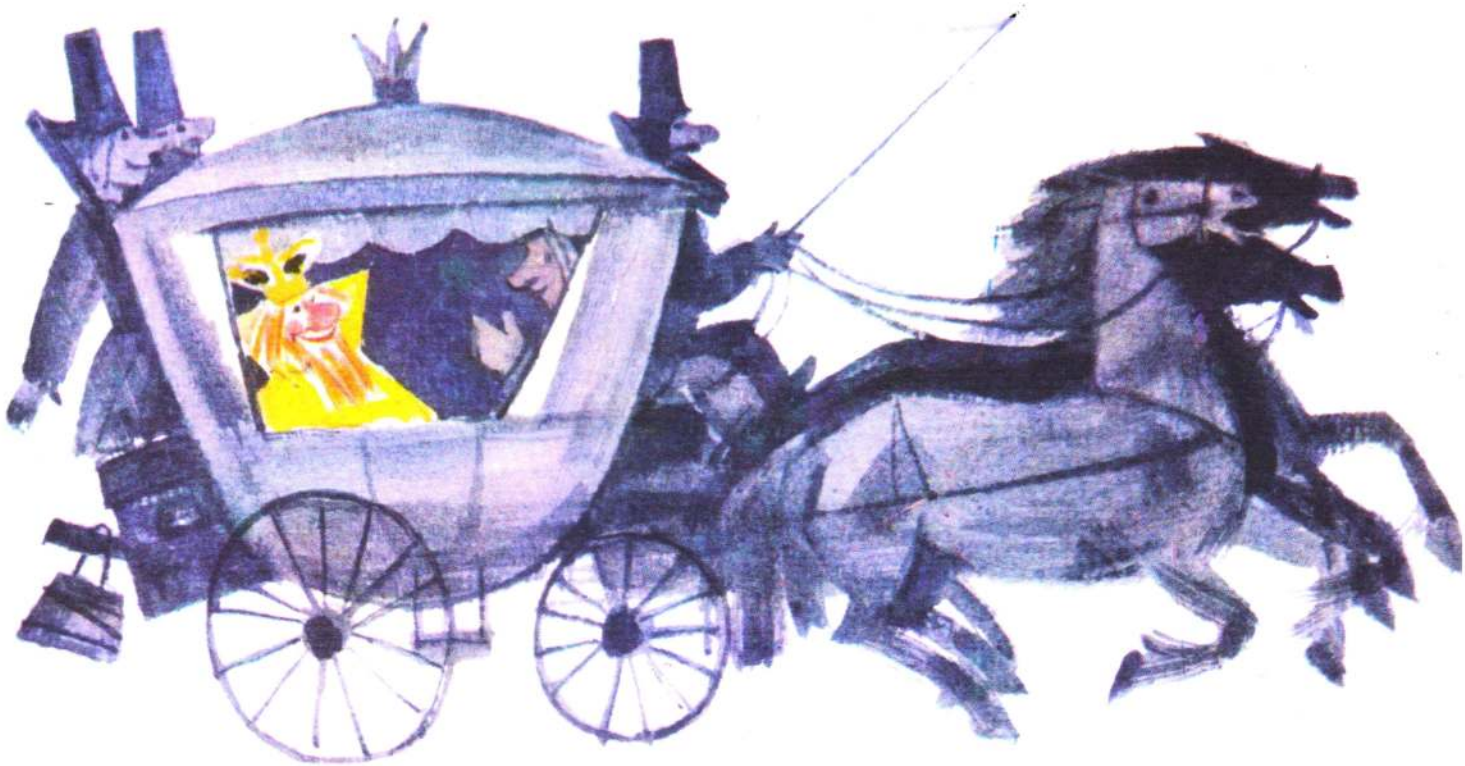
"He said he wants you to come to him and be his guest."

Clay-and-Ashes scratched his head and said:

"But what can I put on? I have nothing to wear."

"Don't worry!" the tricky Cat said to his master. "We shall think of something."

Taking a few things with them, they went off to the Tsar's palace. As they ran through the fields, Martin and Maxim came across the Tsar's army fast asleep. Maxim told his master to wait for him, tiptoed up to the sleeping soldiers and began removing their caps. The soldiers slept so soundly, they did not hear Maxim take off their caps



and hide them in the two large sacks he had with him. One of the sacks Maxim slung over his shoulder, the other he gave to his master. And they continued their way.

Coming up to the river Cat Maxim stopped to drink. He put his sack down near the bridge and asked his master to wait for him.

While drinking, Maxim saw a Crayfish crawling slowly into his hole. The Cat caught the Crayfish by a feeler and threw him onto the bank of the river.

The Crayfish begged Maxim to set him free.

"Please, put me back into the water. Some day you may need my help. I may be able to do you a good turn."

Maxim thought for a while and said:

"What good turn could you do me?"

"In the water I can do anything. Your order will be my command!"

"Well," said the Cat, "undermine the bridge piers before morning."

"I'll do that," the Crayfish answered.

Maxim set the Crayfish free and watched him starting the work at once.

And the Cat went back to his master and said:

"As soon as the bridge falls down, throw all the caps into the water. Then stay here and wait for me."

Saying that Maxim ran across the bridge and hurried to the Tsar's palace.

The Tsar sat in the Greatest Hall waiting for the guests.

"Oh! Your Mighty Majesty!" Maxim the Trickster cried. "My master, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes, got into trouble on his way to your palace. He was crossing the river when the bridge fell down and all his cavalry and all his infantry were drowned. My poor master alone was saved. Now he is in the water with no clothes on, for his dress was washed away by the fast flowing river."

On hearing that the Tsar decided to ride to the bridge. He ordered his carriage and invited Maxim to join him. As they approached the bridge, the Tsar saw Maxim had

not lied. The caps of the infantry and the cavalry were floating on the water, and there was nobody around but Mr. Clay-and-Ashes.

The Tsar felt sorry for Martin and ordered his best tailors to outfit the guest with elegant new clothes.

Soon the new clothing was ready, and Mr. Martin Clay-and-Ashes, looking quite handsome in his new attire, rode together with the Tsar to the palace.

The Tsar talked to Martin, treated him to some food and drink, and said:

"Now I want to see your estate. If you are really that rich, I shall give you my daughter in marriage."

Martin Clay-and-Ashes was frightened to death: what had he to show to the Tsar? His entire estate consisted of a clay stove fallen to pieces. Poor Martin called Maxim and told him about the trouble he was in. Maxim took him aside and whispered:

"Don't you worry, everything will turn out all right!"

Very soon the Tsar's best carriage was ready and waiting for them. The Tsar and Martin got in and off they went. The tricky Maxim said he would run ahead of the carriage and show the way.

After some hours' journey the Tsar's carriage approached the estate of Dragon the Dreadful. Maxim, who ran ahead of the carriage, saw a lot of shepherds tending the cattle in the pasture.

"Whom do you belong to?" Cat Maxim asked of the shepherds.

"To Dragon the Dreadful," said the shepherds.

The Cat's whiskers bristled, making him look fierce enough to scare anybody.

"Don't say you belong to Dragon the Dreadful! Say you belong to Mr. Martin Clay-and-Ashes. If you don't, Thunder and Lightning, coming right behind me, will strike you dead!"

Saying that, Maxim ran away. Soon he saw a large herd of horses and ran up to the herdsmen.

"Who is your master?" the Cat asked.

"Dragon the Dreadful."

"Don't say you belong to Dragon the Dreadful. Say you belong to Mr. Martin Clay-and-Ashes. If you don't, Thunderand Lightning, coming right behind me, will strike you dead!"

Meanwhile the Tsar's carriage rolled rumbling and thundering towards the shepherds.

"Who is your master?" asked the Tsar.

"Mr. Clay-and-Ashes," the shepherds answered with one accord.

"Oh! Your master must be very rich!" said the Tsar greatly astonished and continued his way.

And at that time Cat Maxim the Trickster ran up to the palace of Dragon the Dreadful. On seeing the monster the Cat shouted:

"Hide yourself! Hide quickly! Thunder and Lightning are coming, they are right behind me! They want to strike you dead and grind you into powder!"

Dragon the Dreadful got terribly frightened.

"But where can I hide?" he asked.

The Cat looked around and noticed an old lime - tree with a great hollow in it.

"Hide into this hollow as quickly as you can!" the Cat ordered.

As the Dragon hid into the hollow, Maxim closed it up with earth and stuffed a log into it to make doubly sure the monster wouldn't get out. Then he ran up to the Dragon's servants.

"Who is your master?" Maxim asked.

"Dragon the Dreadful," was the answer.

"Don't say you belong to Dragon the Dreadful! You must say your master is Mr. Martin Clay-and-Ashes.

If you don't, Thunder and Lightning, coming right behind me, will strike you dead!"

"All right," said the frightened servants, "we'll do as you want."

The Tsar's carriage then rolled up to the Dragon's palace. The servants rushed over to meet him.

"Whose palace is this?" asked the Tsar.

"It belongs to Mr. Martin Clay-and-Ashes," replied the servants with one accord.

"Oh, I see you are indeed a wealthy man, Mr. Clay-and-Ashes!" the Tsar said. "I shall give you my daughter in marriage."

So the Tsar returned to his palace, called the musicians, and gave orders for the wedding to take place at once.

There had never been before or since a grander and more sumptuous marriage-feast. And everybody was as merry as merry could be.

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